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## Napoleon: Impact and Legacy

### POINTS TO CONSIDER

Napoleon's remarkable life continues to fascinate and enthral each new generation. Leaving one island in 1778 to embark on a career which would change the map of Europe, he died on another island in 1821 in lonely exile, reflecting on past glories and lost opportunities. On St Helena, while in the custody of the British, he produced his version of the past, an attempt to rewrite history. This led to the growth of the Napoleonic legend. This chapter will focus on three broad themes relating to Napoleon's career. They are:

- Napoleon and the Revolution
- The impact and legacy of Napoleon's rule on France
- The Napoleonic legend

### Key dates

1792	November 19	Decree of Fraternity
1806	November 21	Berlin Decree launched the Continental Blockade
1815	October 17	Arrival of Napoleon on St Helena
1821	May 5	Death of Napoleon
1823		Publication of Las Cases' <i>Mémoires de Sainte-Hélène</i>
1832	July 22	Death of Napoleon's son
1840	December 15	Napoleon's remains were buried in Paris
1848	December 10	Louis Napoleon elected President of the Second Republic
1851	December 2	Louis Napoleon seized power and later declared himself Napoleon III. Start of the Second Empire

### Key question

In what sense was Napoleon heir to the French Revolution?

### 1 | Napoleon and the Revolution

Napoleon's relationship with the Revolution was a changing one. It altered with the passage of time and according to circumstances. On a number of occasions in the early part of his career, he claimed to be a 'son of the Revolution', the staunch upholder of its principles and the inheritor of its teachings on

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liberty and equality. The proclamation of 15 December 1799, outlining the new Constitution, announced firmly that 'the Revolution has been stabilised on the principles which began it'. In 1800, with rather less Revolutionary zeal and a more pragmatic approach, he told the Council of State:

We have finished the romance of the Revolution. Now we must begin its history, looking only for what is real and possible in the application of its principles and not what is speculative and hypothetical. To pursue a different course today would be to philosophise, not govern.

After becoming Emperor, he frequently promised that 'the French Revolution need fear nothing, since the throne of the Bourbons is occupied by a soldier', and at the end of 1812 he was still talking of his 'firm resolve to make the most of all that the Revolution had produced which was great and good'. However, his support for revolutions in general had waned. He began to see himself as a personal peacemaker between revolutionaries and royalists.

The greatest *seigneurs* [landowners] of the old regime now dine with former revolutionaries. My government has brought about this fusion.

In exile on St Helena, however, he sought in the *Mémoriale* to justify his actions and policies and to reinvent himself as the great defender of the Revolution and guardian of its achievements, the 'prince of liberal opinions':

I closed the gulf of anarchy and cleared away the chaos. I purified the Revolution, dignified nations and established kings. I excited every kind of emulation, rewarded every kind of merit, and extended the limits of glory.

When the Revolution began in 1789, Napoleon was a 20-year-old army officer. He was immediately caught up in the excitement and became an ardent patriot, although his enthusiasm was temporarily dampened in August 1792 after witnessing the storming of the Tuileries, and the massacre that followed. Much later, he expressed the view that a revolution, however justified, 'is one of the greatest evils by which mankind can be visited' because of the violence and suffering it brings in its train, but he was able to console himself by reaffirming his belief that 'The Emperor has healed the wounds which the Revolution inflicted.'

### Revolutionary ideals in practice

Napoleon insisted that he maintained the principles and preserved the positive gains of the Revolution; but how far did his domestic policies actually accord with his declared revolutionary ideals? The phrase most commonly linked with the French Revolution is 'Liberty, Equality and Fraternity'. How did Napoleon's policies measure up to these three Revolutionary ideals?

← **Key question**  
Did Napoleon  
preserve or destroy  
the Revolution?

**Key question**

How much liberty was there in Napoleonic France?

**Liberty**

During the Hundred Days, Napoleon, in the course of a long conversation with Benjamin Constant, the liberal thinker who had been one of his most persistent critics, defended his past illiberal actions on the grounds of political necessity. 'I am not an enemy of liberty', he said, '[but] I set it aside when it obstructed my way.' And set it aside he did, restricting liberty of action and freedom of expression, moulding thought and belief, and imposing absolute political authority. This was achieved in a number of ways:

- through his law codes, particularly the Criminal and Penal Codes, which were much closer to the practices of the *ancien régime* than to those of the Revolution
- the use of censorship and propaganda, the practice of indoctrination in the *lycées* and via the imperial catechism
- the activities of the spy network and of the police.

These all played a part in the establishment and maintenance of the Napoleonic state – at the expense of liberty. In 1814, when Napoleon was facing the Allied invasion of France – the first time foreign troops had been on French soil since 1792 – his advisers begged him to call on the memories of those Revolutionary days and rally the people to the country's defence. 'How can I', said Napoleon, 'when I myself have destroyed the Revolution?'

**Key question**

How much of the equality established by the Revolution did Napoleon retain?

**Equality**

The Revolution abolished a range of special privileges enjoyed by numerous groups and individuals and institutions. In place of privilege, the Revolution set out to embed the principle of equality in French society and the French state. Among the special privileges which were abolished were:

- all feudal rights and dues
- the tax exemptions of the church and the nobility
- the privileged estates themselves – the nobility was abolished in 1790
- the dominant role of the Catholic Church within the state
- royalty
- inequality before the law.

The abolition by the Revolution of feudal dues and services was confirmed by Napoleon, and equality before the law was more or less preserved in his Civil Code. The rights to the ownership of property in general, and to the continued enjoyment of *biens nationaux* acquired during the Revolution in particular, were also safeguarded. However, the Napoleonic era broke with the gains made during the Revolution in the following ways:

- The creation of the Legion of Honour and the new imperial nobility marked a clear break by Napoleon with the Revolution (see page 67). The creation of an élite was considered contrary to the idea of equality. According to Napoleon: 'I instituted the new nobility ... to satisfy the people, as the greatest part of

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those I ennobled sprang from them – every private soldier had a right to expect he could earn the title of duke.’ This claim, on close examination, carries little conviction. Of the 3200 imperial titles he created (the majority between 1808 and 1811), only of 20 per cent were common people ennobled for military service, 22 per cent came from the old nobility, but the overwhelming majority – 58 per cent – came from the ranks of the *bourgeoisie*. The historian Jean Tulard considered that the formation of a new imperial nobility in 1808 was a decisive turning point, which marked the beginning of the end of the Napoleonic Empire since it represented a violation of the egalitarian principles of the Revolution.

- In the army, promotion for a conscripted peasant was difficult, and the chances of reaching any rank higher than that of lieutenant were extremely remote. Men like Ney, Murat, and Masséna (see the profile on page 127), who rose to be marshals, were the exceptions. While a number of Napoleon’s generals were from military families of noble origin, the majority came from the *bourgeoisie*. Despite the saying attributed to Napoleon that every soldier carried a field-marshal’s baton in his knapsack, no private soldier ever found one there.
- Taxation was another area of inequality. The Directory had revived the pre-Revolutionary practice of levying indirect taxes, but it was the Empire that expanded them to provide the major part of the revenue needed to pay for the war. On the grounds of good financial practice, the burden of taxation was increasingly shifted from direct to indirect taxation – that is from the well-to-do property owners to the consumers, the majority of whom were poor. Taxes on land rose only slowly, while the yield of indirect taxes on commodities increased by 50 per cent in the decade to 1814. In 1806 a tax on salt, unpleasantly reminiscent of the *gabelle* of the *ancien régime*, was introduced, and four years later the old state monopoly on tobacco was re-established.
- Not surprisingly, therefore, several of his institutions represent a pragmatic compromise between the Revolution and the *ancien régime* – the Concordat, for example, officially abandoned the Revolutionary anti-clerical line and the strict separation of Church and State, while at the same time obtaining official Papal recognition that the sale of church lands was irrevocable.

### Gabelle

The tax on salt imposed during the *ancien régime*.

Key term

### Fraternity

One of the basic aims of the Revolution was to spread its ideals and principles beyond the frontiers of France. This goal was enshrined in the Decree of Fraternity, issued on 19 November 1792. The French promised support to the citizens of any country wishing to overthrow their rulers. Napoleon certainly sought to import some of the key structures of the Revolution into the territories he occupied. The French legal system, which established equality before the law and an end to feudalism, was introduced with various degrees of success into many parts of the Empire (see page 106). Yet the fraternity of the Napoleonic

### Key question

What was the impact of French fraternity during the Napoleonic era?

Issue of the Decree of Fraternity:  
19 November 1792

Key date

Empire came with a price. As the Italians found between 1796 and 1797, the benefits of the new structures had to be paid for in indemnities. Being an ally of France also meant that levies of troops had to be provided for the *Grande Armée*. The friendship of the Empire proved to be very much a two-edged sword; it brought benefits but at a high cost.

While the Napoleonic era marked a break with the Revolutionary period, there was also a measure of continuity with it. Under the Emperor there was a return to a much more authoritarian style of government. Many of the most significant gains made since 1789 were, however, maintained. The conclusion of historians Richard Cobb and Colin Jones is:

Although Napoleon consolidated many of the Revolution's achievements, including administrative and legal changes, economic reforms and the abolition of feudalism, much of what was most distinctive and significant about those years perished at his hands. The Rights of Man were turned on their head as discipline, hierarchy and authoritarianism replaced the revolutionary device of liberty, equality and fraternity. Under his rule France passed into the hands of an autocrat with far more absolute power than Louis XVI had ever enjoyed.

#### Summary diagram: Napoleon and the Revolution

Did Napoleon preserve or destroy the gains of the French Revolution?

##### Preserve:

- Ended tax exemptions for church and nobility
- Ended feudalism
- Equality before the law
- Transfer of land

##### Destroy:

- Restoration of hereditary monarchy
- The separation of Church and State established during the Revolution
- Use of censorship and repression
- Ended direct democracy and democratic republicanism
- Restored honours system and nobility

## 2 | The Impact and Legacy of Napoleon's Rule on France

There is consensus that continuity between the Napoleonic era and the *ancien régime* was much greater than previously believed. It appears that under the Empire, France changed less than during the shorter Revolutionary period and that comparatively little of Napoleon's work outlasted his regime. Of course, there were major political, constitutional, legal and religious changes under Napoleon. These were intended by him to affect the way individuals thought and the way they lived.

### Government and administration

Some features of the new political structure suggested parallels with the *ancien régime*. These were:

- The Council of State, chosen by the First Consul – this was similar to the old Royal Council by which the kings of France had governed.
- Napoleon retained the *départements* of the Revolution, but reintroduced the 40,000 pre-1789 communes as his basic territorial and electoral unit.
- The role of the prefect was similar to that of the *intendant* of the *ancien régime*.

Once the Consulate was made hereditary it became to all intents and purposes a monarchy. In 1804, Napoleon became 'by the grace of God and the Constitution, Emperor of the French'. He seems to have decided against adopting the title 'King of France' in deference to revolutionary sensibilities, and to avoid a direct comparison with the monarchical past. In any case, his ambitions had outgrown the idea of a mere kingdom; he already saw himself at the head of a 'universal empire'. This might all seem a far cry from the doctrines of 1789. However, by retaining '*République française*' on official documents until 1804 and on the reverse of his coins until 1809, Napoleon was demonstrating to the people that his government, both Consulate and Empire, was a continuation of the Revolution.

On the other hand, when in 1804, after his consecration by the Pope, Napoleon took the crown from the altar, raised it above the congregation and placed it on his own head, he was showing that sovereignty no longer belonged to the people as in republican days but had been transferred absolutely to him and his heirs for ever. The presence of the Pope at Notre Dame certainly gave Napoleon a prestige he could not otherwise have acquired, while making it plain to the rest of the world that the church had given its blessing to an empire sprung from a revolution it had previously denounced. Indeed, on the eve of the Austrian marriage in 1810 (which itself was seen by many Frenchmen as a betrayal of the Revolution), Napoleon, entertaining what he called a 'garden of kings', presented himself to them as a fellow monarch welcoming his royal neighbours.

The lack of any popular representation in either of his regimes would not have worried Napoleon, for his view of sovereignty of the people had become far removed from that of Rousseau's *Social Contract*, the work that had influenced him as a young man. By 1804, Napoleon considered that sovereignty of the people did not imply their right to a say in government. What Napoleon believed it meant was the right of the people to have a ruler who governed them as the majority wished to be governed. In a way, the Napoleonic Empire was similar to an absolute monarchy but under another name.

It would be easy, however, to exaggerate the repressive nature of Napoleon's rule and to forget that he did maintain the great

#### Key question

What similarities were there between Napoleon's political structure and that of the *ancien régime*?

gains of the Revolution. He confirmed in the Constitution and the Civil Code the end of feudalism in France and the equality of Frenchmen before the law, and in the Concordat the irrevocability of the sale of the *biens nationaux*.

**Key question**  
What impact did Napoleon's rule have on French society?

Key terms

**Agricultural revolution**

The process by which agriculture is mechanised and new methods of food production are introduced.

**Subsistence level**

A backward type of agriculture producing only enough food to survive.

**Social impact**

As knowledge of social conditions is patchy and inconclusive, assessing the impact of Napoleon's rule on French society is difficult. Where local studies have been undertaken they appear to indicate that agricultural wages rose slowly in the years 1800–15. Wages for the most part did not keep pace with rents, which rose sharply due to the increased demand for land. The reasons for this increased demand are uncertain. It may have been a consequence of the increase in population. There was no **agricultural revolution** during the period 1800–15, and farming continued at a **subsistence level**. Until 1811, harvests were good and food was cheap and plentiful. It was not until the bad harvest of 1811, followed by the extra conscription burdens of 1812–14, that Napoleon was faced with any serious social unrest in the countryside. Despite the good harvests and the end of feudalism, there seems to have been at least as much rural poverty in the later years of the Empire as there had been before 1789.

Napoleon was very committed to ensuring that he maintained the support of the main beneficiaries of the Revolution, such as the *bourgeoisie* who had bought land. His social policies were conservative in relation to the rural and urban poor since he did not wish to upset the *bourgeoisie* by introducing costly reforms that they would have to pay for. He liked to speak of how the French people loved him as the 'people's king' or as the peasants' friend, but it is difficult to see why either he or they should have believed it. He did nothing for the mass of the people except conscript their sons for the army while taxing them heavily for the privilege. After 1815, the propaganda produced by Napoleon's supporters carefully crafted the mythical figure of the 'Emperor of the common man' as a reaction to Bourbon favouritism towards the aristocracy.

In the urban areas, conditions for workers were bad. Two measures combined to limit their freedoms:

- The Le Chapelier Law which banned trade unions was reaffirmed in 1803.
- The introduction of the *livret* (see page 66) threatened a worker's right to seek new employment.

Napoleon seems to have regarded the urban workers with the gravest suspicion, believing them to be troublemakers who needed firm handling and close police supervision.

In a much wider social context, Napoleon's long wars did have an impact on the population of France, but to a much lesser extent than was at one time believed. Of the two million men who found themselves in the army between 1800 and 1814 the number killed (dying of wounds, disease, hunger or cold, or who simply went missing believed killed) has been estimated at



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916,000. This figure is usually quoted as representing about seven per cent of the total population of France; but that is misleading because the losses were not spread evenly across the population. They fell heavily on the young men of marriageable age – a devastating 38 per cent of men born in the years 1790–5 were killed, the majority of them between 1812 and 1814. To the extent that this must have left many young women without husbands, and reduced further the already declining birth rate, these losses contributed to some extent to the slow growth of the population in nineteenth-century France.

### Economic impact

Opinions differ over whether or not the French economy expanded or stood still under Napoleon. In 1785 the economic development of Britain and France was comparable. But over the next 15 years, while industrial development in Britain was forging ahead, the upheavals of the Revolution were holding back the French economy. The view of the British social historian Alfred Cobban, that under Napoleon the only 'trade which flourished was smuggling', would appear to be rather harsh. The picture from the industrial sector during the Empire is mixed.

Some sectors of the French economy were probably on the edge of an industrial revolution by 1800. The cotton industry was certainly expanding. Two factors that contributed to this were:

- mechanisation, through the introduction of imitation British spinning machines, such as the 'mule-jennies'
- the protectionist effect of the Continental Blockade on domestic production that removed the competition from British cotton cloth.

There was a dramatic growth in the number of cotton-spinning firms in Paris, where between 1808 and 1811, 57 were in operation, employing over 12,000 workers. French imports of raw cotton more than doubled between 1803 and 1807, and a shortage of supplies from French colonies was made up until 1811 by overland shipments from the **Levant**. There was no similar advance in any of the other textile industries. Linen and hemp manufacturers found themselves facing declining demand and the silk and woollen industries suffered also from the fashionable preference for cotton dress materials during the Empire.

A number of other industries expanded slowly in the Napoleonic period. The chemical industry did make some progress, developing artificial dyes and new bleaching materials for the cotton spinners and weavers, and experimenting with the production of artificial soda for the soap manufacturers of Marseilles. The iron industry benefited from the demand for armaments needed for Napoleon's wars, but failed to modernise itself, preferring the old method of **smelting** the ore with charcoal rather than coal.

### Key question

What developments occurred in the French economy under Napoleon?

### Levant

Land bordering the eastern Mediterranean.

### Smelting

The process of melting an ore in order to extract metal from it.



The economy of the countryside was equally stagnant. Despite official encouragement, land clearing and drainage made little headway. Crop yields did not increase and labour methods remained primitive. Landowners did not reinvest their rents in the land and no new agricultural techniques were developed. Any agricultural expansion that took place was simply an extension of the cultivated area. The only other development of any significance was a government programme for the growing of sugar-beet and chicory to fill gaps left by the colonially produced sugar and coffee, which were no longer available because French maritime trade was being blockaded by Britain.

#### Key question

How did the Continental Blockade affect France?

### The impact of the Continental Blockade 1806–13

The Blockade was an ambitious plan to conquer Britain by economic means. British exports were to be prevented from entering Europe. The unsold goods, it was believed, would then build up to such an extent that British trade would be brought to a standstill and its economy disrupted. If, at the same time, *imports* into Britain were allowed, or even encouraged – in exchange for cash payment in gold – this would help to drain away its bullion reserves and weaken its economy further. Britain would be unable to fulfil its main role in the Coalition against France – that of paymaster, providing the money needed to maintain and equip the allied armies. It was hoped that this would make Britain sign a separate peace before its position as a trading nation had been totally undermined.

The basis of the Blockade was laid out in two decrees:

- The Berlin Decree of 21 November 1806 stated that the British Isles were officially in a state of blockade by land and sea and forbade any communication with them by France or any of its satellites.
- The Milan Decree (1807) extended the embargo on British goods to all neutral ships that complied with the new British demands.

Britain responded by insisting that all neutral ships be required to call at British ports for inspection, to pay duties and to obtain licences, before trading with French-controlled ports.

The Blockade was intended to protect French home industries from British competition and to provide them with new European markets in the satellite and annexed states. In return, these states would provide goods needed by France for home consumption or manufacture and re-export to the rest of the Empire. In this way Napoleon's European territories would form a self-sufficient commercial and trading enterprise, independent of foreign goods.

There were both positive and negative consequences for France from the Continental Blockade.

Key date

Berlin Decree  
launched the  
Continental Blockade:  
21 November 1806

Key terms

**Negative**

- The great ports of the Atlantic and Channel coasts did suffer severely from the loss of sea-borne trade, and from the British navy's **counter-blockading** activities.
- Shipbuilding and its associated maritime trades, such as rope-making and sail-making, declined, as did inland industries that depended on overseas markets.
- The long-established linen industries of the north and west of France were badly affected by the loss of exports.
- The loss of profits from overseas trade resulted in less capital for investment. Some investors moved their money out of commercial enterprises, such as trading, into what seemed to be more secure areas, such as land ownership. The lack of business confidence led to the collapse of a number of banks.
- Attempting to enforce the Blockade throughout Europe pushed France into disastrous new conflicts, notably in Spain and Russia, leaving the country weakened militarily, economically and politically and left Napoleon's fortunes in decline.

**Positive**

- In areas away from the coasts, many traders and producers benefited from the protection to home industries offered by the Blockade. It provided an opportunity to export goods across the Alps and the Rhine to outlying parts of the Empire. Consumers in those areas who were denied access to cheaper British goods had no choice but to pay the high prices demanded by French producers.
- As the British navy closed the sea-lanes to French goods, trade routes moved overland, away from the coast. Paris became an important trading centre for luxuries, and items of fashion, as did Lyons for silk goods. Strasbourg and other eastern frontier cities prospered as **entreports** as the Rhine traffic and the trade it provided in both legitimate and **contraband goods** more than doubled in the years 1806–10.

**Counter-blockading**

The prevention by the British navy of all ships entering or leaving French ports.

**Entreports**

Ports which receive, store and re-export goods.

**Contraband goods**

Smuggled items.

Key terms

**Cultural impact**

Napoleon's cultural legacy to France was not great. He was not particularly concerned with the arts, literature, sculpture, painting or drama, except in so far as they could be used for propaganda purposes to glorify himself. His regime imposed censorship on books and periodicals and he closed down most of the theatres in Paris (see page 70). Napoleon did make some changes to the appearance of the city. He added or commissioned a small number of monuments and buildings in the classical style – among them the Arc de Triomphe Du Carrousel (1808), the column in the Place Vendôme (1814) and the planned rebuilding of La Madeleine church as a Greek temple. In general, however, Paris remained in appearance the city of Louis XVI.

One cultural feature that did have an impact relates to the style and fashion of the period 1800–15. The name given to it is 'Empire' (perhaps to emphasise the importance of official art). This is seen at its most distinctive in the context of interior decoration where it directly reflects Napoleon's own interests. Its inspiration was from the classical world of ancient Greece and Rome. Napoleon was also very interested in Egypt, where he campaigned in 1799 and concerned himself as much with

**Key question**

What was the cultural impact of Napoleon's rule?

Modern-day photographs of Paris showing the Arc de Triomphe Du Carrousel (top left), Place Vendôme (top right) and La Madeleine (bottom). These were clearly inspired by similar buildings and monuments in the ancient world.



deciphering the country's ancient heritage as with the process of conquering it. Inlaid furniture, decorated with mythological figures of all kinds and military emblems, was very much the rage, as were the new, tall looking-glasses seen everywhere. Antiquity, with a touch of the east, dominated not only furnishings but the Empire style of dress favoured by everyone in society except Napoleon. Without regard to fashion he continued to wear, except on state occasions, a battered hat, a long grey overcoat and the green jacket of the Imperial Guard.

#### Key question

Did any of Napoleon's policies and achievements survive his defeat in 1815?

#### Napoleon's legacy: what survived after 1815?

The restoration of the Bourbon monarchy in 1814 resulted in changes to the structure of government. Under pressure from the allies, Louis XVIII granted France a limited constitution. Napoleon's centralised and autocratic structure, therefore, disappeared, along with the imperial title, in favour of a (nominally) representative government. However, other institutions remained, including much of his **bureaucratic organisation**, which had increased rapidly in size by 1815. The Ministry of the Interior enjoyed very wide-ranging powers, overseeing provincial administration, trade, arts and crafts, prisons, public works, education, science, welfare and a host of other topics. It had proliferated into a number of departments and bureaux with an ever increasing staff to match. Other civil

Key term

#### Bureaucratic organisation

The government administration.

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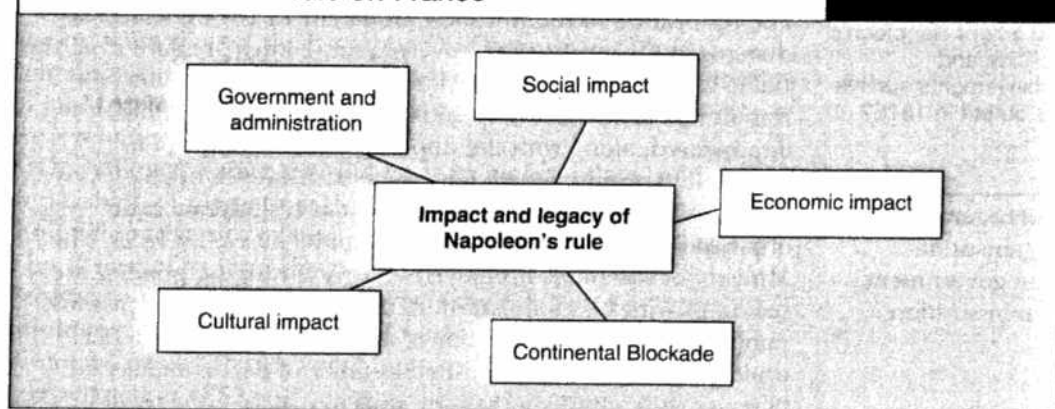
ministries had expanded equally rapidly to meet the needs of a government perpetually at war, doubling their staff to a total of around 4000 by the late Empire. On the basis of this well-organised civil service, headed by specially selected and trained auditors, Napoleon could be described as 'the originator of modern centralised bureaucracy in France'.

Among the other aspects of Napoleon's regime which have survived are the following:

- The Legion of Honour continued to be awarded.
- Frenchmen remained equal before the law.
- The land settlement was left untouched.
- The legal codes and much of their judicial organisation remained in being. Today, judges are still appointed for life and the *Code Napoléon* is still the foundation of modern French law, although it was recodified in 1958.
- The provincial administrative system of prefects, sub-prefects and mayors remained the basis of local government.
- Most of Napoleon's financial reforms survived, including the Bank of France.
- The *lycées*, in a demilitarised form, survived and the Baccalaureate examination introduced in 1809 is still sat by French children at the end of their school life.
- The Concordat, minus the imperial catechism, remained the basis of relations between the French government and the Roman Catholic Church until 1904 when it came to an end with an agreement that totally separated church and state.

Arguably Napoleon's greatest legacy to France was a civil one. From more than a decade of war he left his country no permanent reminder – except a few triumphal arches, civic names and the Legion of Honour. Whether the overall effect of Napoleon's rule on France was for good or ill is debatable – the strong government, the good order, the glory and prestige that he gave the country must be balanced against the restriction of freedom, and the cost of war, in terms of human suffering and economic hardship, that his regime imposed on the French people.

### Summary diagram: The impact and legacy of Napoleon's rule on France



**Key question**

What was the Napoleonic legend?

Key date

Arrival of Napoleon on St Helena: 17 October 1815

### 3 | The Napoleonic Legend

From early on in his career, Napoleon went to great lengths to present as favourable an image of himself as possible. This practice continued and was refined when he attained power. He was possibly one of the earliest rulers to appreciate the power of propaganda. Following his final defeat and imprisonment on the island of St Helena on 17 October 1815, he set out to explain and justify his actions in a series of lengthy dictated recollections. When these were published, they formed the basis of the 'Napoleonic legend' of which he himself had been the chief architect, and on which others were to build after his death.

**Key question**

What did Napoleon consider to be the benefits of propaganda?

#### Image and reality

As far as Napoleon was concerned the benefits of propaganda were considerable. These included:

- ensuring the presentation of a favourable image of himself and the imperial dynasty
- presenting France and its revolutionary achievements in a positive way to the citizens of other European states
- spreading negative and hostile views of his enemies.

Napoleon used a number of methods to cultivate his image and to spread his propaganda. The two main methods used were:

- First, controlling the media. During the Empire, Napoleon imposed strict press censorship (see page 70) ensuring that only favourable material was published. He took a direct role in issuing Bulletins that were delivered to all prefects for display in their departments, providing carefully crafted updates of the latest military situation.
- Second, projecting a positive visual image. Napoleon employed painters to depict himself in a range of positive ways. These images variously showed the Emperor as heroic, brave, powerful, magisterial and compassionate.

Both these methods went some way towards creating a **personality cult** and helped to sow the seeds of the Napoleonic legend.

The origin of the legend pre-dates the successful *coup* of Brumaire to his time in Italy during 1796–7. Napoleon's role in a string of dazzling victories at Castiglioni, Arcola, Lodi, Rivoli and Mantua was embellished and exaggerated both at the time and later by a range of writers and artists (see page 81).

Key terms

**Personality cult**

The elevation of an individual by means of propaganda to almost divine status.

**Disinformation**

The practice of spreading false information for the purpose of deception.

#### Self-promotion

As well as making proclamations and issuing Orders of the Day, Napoleon published newsheets, full of **disinformation**, intended to boost army morale and dishearten the enemy. These newsheets were widely circulated, and their contents included exaggerated reports or Bulletins on the favourable progress of the war, written by Napoleon himself. He also sent senior officers to Paris in relays to report personally to the Directory, and also to brief the Paris

press. When he returned to France in 1797 he was greeted as a hero. The *Institut de France*, the leading scientific association in Europe, honoured Napoleon by admitting him to their mathematics division, and everywhere he went he was feted. At a splendid ceremony in the Luxembourg Palace he personally handed over the Treaty of Campo Formio to the Directors.

This practice of issuing self-promoting Bulletins continued throughout Napoleon's career. His interpretation of the Battle of Eylau (1807) offers a good insight into his methods. It was the first battle in which some of his troops had run away, and where he sustained high losses. Napoleon managed by skilful manipulation of the facts to make it appear not a drawn encounter but a French victory. His technique was to:

- deny emphatically the Russian versions of the engagement
- dictate 'an eye-witness account, translated from the German' as the one he wished to go down into history
- send back to France specially commissioned pictures of the action
- issue Bulletins which initially falsified the number of French dead, substituting 2000 for the real figure of 20,000
- publish the almost certainly fictitious 'last words of a French officer killed in the battle'. They bore a close resemblance to other 'last words' used in earlier Bulletins. 'I die content, since victory is ours ... Tell the Emperor I have only one regret – that in a few moments I shall be beyond doing anything more in his service or for the glory of France.'

There could be no place in the legend for a drawn battle, any more than for a defeat.

### Visual images

Napoleon fully appreciated the power of the visual image for propaganda purposes. Official painters were recruited to portray Napoleon and his regime in the most flattering light. To this end, he was aided by some of the greatest artists of the age. Two in particular stand out. **Gros** met Napoleon in 1796 during his Italian campaign and was responsible for producing a number of carefully honed images of the Emperor. In 1804 he completed *Bonaparte Visiting the Victims of the Plague at Jaffa* (see page 72). The painting depicts an incident from the Egyptian campaign when Napoleon, at his most compassionate, visited and comforted sick soldiers at a hospital. The heroic Emperor is the theme of another work by Gros. *Napoleon at the Battle of Eylau* was clearly intended as a work of propaganda (see page 165). It is a romanticised depiction of the indecisive battle, fought in a snowstorm in February 1807. Gros's version of the battlefield does not evoke the horrific reality of the 40,000 French and Russian dead; it shows, instead, Napoleon the inspirer, motivator and comforter, among his beloved troops.

The greatest of Napoleon's image-makers was **Jacques-Louis David**. He often used considerable **artistic licence** when painting official portraits or recording state events, in a way best suited for

### Antoine-Jean Gros 1771–1835

Prominent French painter. Met Napoleon during his first Italian campaign. Produced many large paintings of Napoleon at war.

### Jacques-Louis David 1748–1825

The most famous French painter of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic periods. Appointed Napoleon's official court painter.

### Artistic licence

Where an artist interprets an event by stretching reality to fit his on her preconception.



*Napoleon on the Battle Field of Eylau on 9th February 1807, painted in 1808 by Baron Antoine-Jean Gros (1771–1835).*



use as propaganda. When commissioned to portray Napoleon's crossing of the Alps in the second Italian campaign of 1800, David was instructed to show the heroic First Consul 'calm, on a fiery horse' at the head of his men (see front cover). This he accomplished with considerable style, although it was common knowledge that Napoleon had travelled on a mule, plodding along some way to the rear of the main army. Napoleon had refused even to sit for David on this occasion, telling him that it was more important to immortalise his spirit of genius than to capture his exact likeness. It was not until long after Napoleon's death that a more realistic version of the scene was painted by the French artist Paul Delaroche (see page 166).

#### Key questions

How did the legend develop? What were its main features?

#### The emergence of the Napoleonic legend

During the six years that he was on St Helena (1815–21) in the custody of the British, Napoleon spent a great deal of his time perfecting his life story. From the very outset he seems to have been determined to make the most of his captivity to justify his actions. As he pointed out to his companions, 'Our situation here may even have its attractions; the whole world is looking at us; we are martyrs in an immortal cause.' This careful reworking of his career led the historian Tulard to conclude that 'the greatest of Napoleon's victories was over his detractors. It was at St Helena that the ogre became God.' It is possible that Napoleon's deteriorating mental condition, his growing megalomania,





*Napoleon Crossing the Alps* by Paul Delaroche, 1850.

became evident in his writings and conversation while in exile. He began by dictating his own *Memoirs*, but these, concerned largely with details of his early campaigns and of Waterloo, are conspicuously dull. Much more interesting are the reminiscences, diaries and journals written by Napoleon's companions on St Helena, which record in considerable detail his conversations with them against the background of everyday life at Longwood, the house where he lived on the island.

The first and most influential of these documentary sources, published in 1823, two years after Napoleon's death, was the *Mémoires de Sainte-Hélène*. It was written by the Comte de Las Cases as a record of conversations he had with Napoleon between 1815 and 1818. This work is probably the most important single element in the later development of the legend. Despite being described after publication as 'an effusion of sentimental old French twaddle' it sold large numbers of copies, and has been extensively, and sometimes uncritically, used ever since as the

Publication of Las Cases' *Mémoires de Sainte-Hélène*: 1823

Key date

A print of Napoleon on St Helena.



chief guide in evaluating Napoleon's own perception of his policies.

The *Mémoriale* and to some extent *A Voice from St Helena* (1822), the journals written by Napoleon's doctor on the island, B. Edward O'Meara, need to be used with caution. They are all to some extent limited in that they were intended from the outset for publication and were written by men devoted to Napoleon. They are essentially **hagiographical** studies and do not provide a balanced and critical evaluation of their subject. Three private journals, never meant for other eyes, present a much more unvarnished picture of Napoleon, but have only become available for study comparatively recently and have not so far been greatly used by historians and biographers. Napoleon encouraged his companions to write down word for word everything he said, or, more often, dictated to them, by promising quite correctly that the records they were compiling would make their fortunes when published after his death.

Las Cases, whose *Mémoriale* runs to around 500,000 words, based his work on notes made at the time, but seems to have edited them extensively before publication, smoothing Napoleon's usual abrupt phrases and fiery rhetoric into a well-rounded literary style. Opinions vary about how accurately Napoleon's actual words were recorded by any of the diarists; but even if every word *were* reproduced exactly as spoken, 'whether it is all true is quite another thing!' as an early critic said after reading O'Meara's journal.

Key term

**Hagiographical**

A biographical study which is very sympathetic and uncritical of its subject.

### Napoleon's view of his rule

During his exile Napoleon set out to change the public perception of his rule and his role, from that of a military dictator to one of long-time, albeit unrecognised, champion of liberalism and nationalism. The political climate in Europe after 1815 following the restoration of the Bourbons was influenced by the **Holy Alliance** (Austria, Prussia and Russia). To many this was seen as a victory for the forces of reaction. The core of the Napoleonic legend was Napoleon's projection of himself as the champion of liberalism against the reactionary monarchies of old Europe.

Napoleon made a number of points to support his assertion that he was at heart a liberal monarch who had been forced into adopting war by his enemies. These had been:

- His granting of a liberal constitution – the *Acte Additionnel* – during the Hundred Days (see page 141).
- The declaration that his previous autocratic rule had been forced upon him by circumstances, and was in any case no more than a temporary measure needed to enable him as a true patriot to defend France against its enemies. 'If I had won in 1812, my constitutional reign would have begun then. Had I reigned 20 years longer I would have shown the difference between a constitutional emperor and a king of France.'
- As 'the natural mediator in the struggle of the past (i.e. the old ruling families of Europe) against the Revolution' he had brought together monarchy and liberalism.
- He was not warlike; he had always wanted peace. It was only the old dynasties who had imposed war upon him. He had been forced to stop them destroying the Revolutionary gains in France, and to liberate and unify the peoples of Europe who were still being oppressed by feudal governments. 'Each of my victories was a diplomatic step on my road towards restoring peace to Europe ... after every victory I always offered a general peace.'
- Had he been given time, the 'people's Emperor' would have 'divided Europe into national states, freely formed and free internally ... a United States of Europe would have become a possibility' in a new era of peaceful economic co-operation.
- He had been unable to deliver his ultimate vision for Europe due to the opposition of Britain – paymaster of the various anti-French coalitions.

### The growth of the Napoleonic legend

After Napoleon's death in 1821, the legend gathered momentum in France. This was despite an official ban in the country until 1830 of the publication of any material favourable to him. Napoleon's downfall and lonely death in exile may well have contributed to the rapid growth of the legend in the 1820s and 1830s. While many poets and artists over time adopted a romantic and sentimental view of the Napoleonic era others focused on the reality of his rule. François-René Chateaubriand

**Key question**  
How did Napoleon view his reign?

**Holy Alliance**  
A reactionary alliance established in 1815 aimed at preventing future revolutions.

Key term

**Key question**  
What contributed to the growth of the Napoleonic legend?

(1768–1848), one of the outstanding French literary figures of the early nineteenth century, who had always been extremely hostile to Napoleon, pointed out how easy it was to glorify Napoleon once he was dead and his dictatorship a thing of the past:

It is the fashion of the day to magnify Napoleon's victories. Gone are the sufferers, and the victims' curses, their cries of pain, their howls of anguish are heard no more ... no longer are parents imprisoned for their sons, nor a whole village punished for the desertion of a conscript ... no longer are the conscription lists stuck up at street corners ... It is forgotten that the people, the court, the generals, the friends of Napoleon had all become weary of his oppression and his conquests.

People *were* forgetting the negative aspects of Napoleon's rule, now that they were faced with life during the restoration – a dull Bourbon court, the pervasive influence of *émigrés* and priests and the end of any further glory for France. This 'bored generation', born too late to have fought in his wars, discovered in Napoleon a hero. His brilliant victories and conquests and the glory he brought France were in marked contrast to the dreariness of everyday life after 1815. The deaths and loss of political and cultural freedoms were conveniently ignored. By the 1830s the Romantics were mourning the so-called 'martyrdom' of Napoleon's last days on St Helena.

#### Key question

How did the name Napoleon continue to exert an influence?

#### Key dates

Napoleon's remains were buried in Paris: 15 December 1840

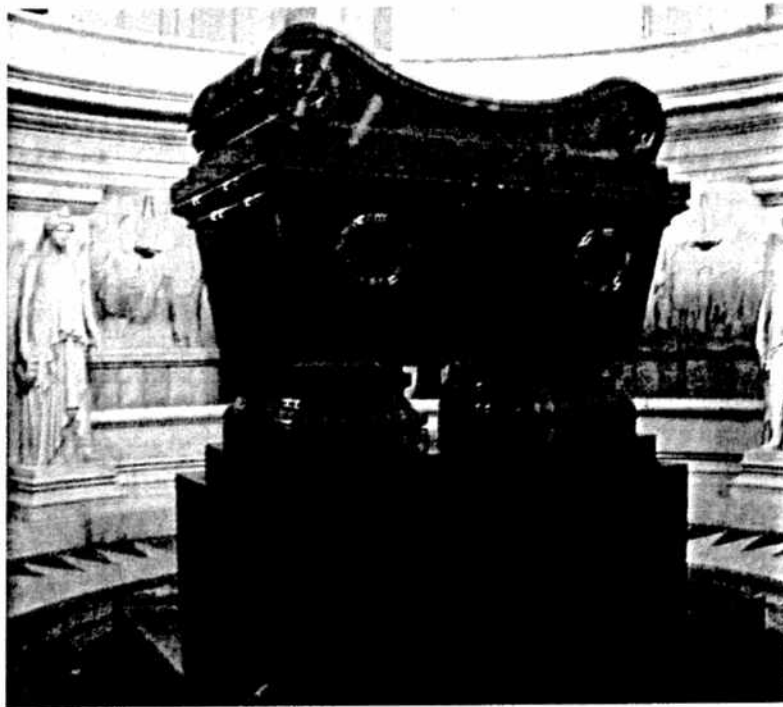
Death of Napoleon's son: 22 July 1832

Louis Napoleon elected President of the Second Republic: 10 December 1848

#### The accolade

In his will Napoleon had requested that his remains be returned to France to, '... rest on the banks of the Seine, among the French people that I loved so well'. King Louis-Philippe, in a bid to court popularity, decided to fulfil Napoleon's wishes. In October 1840, almost 25 years to the day since Napoleon had landed on St Helena, a French ship arrived there, with British permission, to take his body back to Paris. On 15 December 1840 amid great ceremony the procession made its way to the Invalides, a former military hospital. With the final reinterment of the body in a magnificent sarcophagus below the golden dome of the Invalides, the Napoleonic legend reached its zenith. Surrounded by a range of Napoleonic relics, his hat, his sword worn at Austerlitz, his insignia of the Legion of Honour, hero-worship merged into almost religious veneration of the former Emperor.

After the death of Napoleon's son, the King of Rome, on 22 July 1832, followers of the Emperor placed their faith in his nephew, the politically ambitious Louis-Napoleon, son of Napoleon's brother Louis. He staged unsuccessful *coups* in 1836 and 1840 against King Louis-Philippe, in the course of which he proclaimed that he 'represented ... a principle, a cause and a defeat: the principle is the sovereignty of the people, the cause is the cause of the Empire, and the defeat is Waterloo'. The monarchy was overthrown by a revolution in 1848 and the Second Republic established. Although largely unknown, the name he shared with his illustrious uncle was certainly a factor in gaining



Napoleon's tomb in the Invalides in Paris.

Louis-Napoleon seized power on 2 December 1851. In his *Napoleonic Ideas* he set out in detail, as an example to be followed, the view of the First Empire outlined by his uncle while in exile. Louis-Napoleon seized power on 2 December 1851 and a year later established the Second Empire. As Napoleon III he declared that he stood for 'order and authority, religion, the welfare of the people and ... for national dignity': many, therefore, expected that he would prove a reincarnation of the Napoleon of the legend. This did not happen, and with the collapse of his regime in 1870 the legend suffered an eclipse.

### Napoleon in history

When news of Napoleon's death was published in London on 6 July 1821, *The Times*, an establishment newspaper, attempted an instant summary of his impact on France and Europe. It described his life as 'the most extraordinary yet known to political history'. While generously conceding that 'He was steady and faithful in his friendships, and not vindictive where it was in his power to be', the paper went on to note that:

Buonaparte will go down to posterity as a man who ... applied his immense means to the production of a greater share of mischief and misery to his fellow-creatures, who carried on a series of aggressions against foreign states, to divert the minds of his own subjects from the sense of their domestic slavery; thus imposing on foreign nations a necessity for arming to shake off his yoke, and affording to foreign despots a pretext for following his example.

Louis Napoleon seized power and later declared himself Napoleon III. Start of the Second Empire: 2 December 1851

Key date

### Key question

How has the study of Napoleon developed since his death?

Despite the view of the British, however, Napoleon never seems to have had any serious doubts about the verdict of history on his career. This was not surprising as he took great pains to provide historians with records favourable to it, both before and after 1815. It was typical of him that, glancing through old copies of the official, government-sponsored newspaper, *Le Moniteur*, he expressed his approval: 'These are invariably favourable to me alone. Really talented and careful historians will write history with official documents. Now these documents are full of me; it is their testimony I solicit and invoke.'

From St Helena he attempted to pre-empt how historians might assess his life:

I have no fear whatever about my fame. Posterity will do me justice. The truth will be known ... From nothing I raised myself to be the most powerful monarch in the world ... The historian of the Empire ... will have an easy task, for the facts speak for themselves, they shine like the sun ... On what point could I be assailed on which a historian could not defend me? For my intentions? As to these I can be absolved. For my despotism? But it can be demonstrated that dictatorship was absolutely necessary. Will it be said that I restricted liberty? It can be proved that licentiousness and anarchy still threatened liberty. Shall I be accused of being too fond of War? It can be shown I was always attacked first ... Shall I be blamed for my ambition? ... my ambition was of the highest and noblest kind that ever perhaps existed! that of establishing and consecrating the rule of reason and the exercise and enjoyment of all the human faculties! Here the historian will probably feel compelled to regret that such an ambition was not fulfilled.

During his confinement on St Helena, Napoleon's health deteriorated quite rapidly. In the second half of 1817 he suffered from severe swelling of the legs. In October of that year he was diagnosed by his doctor O'Meara with hepatitis – a liver disease, and was treated with mercury. The views that he expressed, and which were recorded by Las Cases, may well suggest a growing irrationality to the point of madness in the last years of his life. His version of history in the above example would appear to be delusional.

Key figure

**Anne Louise Germaine, Madame de Staël 1766–1817**  
Prominent author and thinker.  
Daughter of Necker, a leading politician under Louis XVI.  
She was an outspoken critic of Napoleon.

**'For or against' Napoleon?**

Chateaubriand was one of the first critical commentators on Napoleon's career, publishing in 1814 a pamphlet denouncing him as a destroyer of men and a suppressor of freedom. Thousands of historians and writers who followed him produced works that were either 'for or against' Napoleon. Very few were neutral. **Madame de Staël**, whose account of Napoleon was published in 1818, within a year of her death, was just as critical, just as damning as Chateaubriand, but her work contained a historical perspective, setting Napoleon in his time and place, measuring him against events – and finding him wanting.

## 172 | Napoleon, France and Europe

As Napoleon's death receded into the past, French histories of his life multiplied rapidly. One of the most important was by Adolphe Thiers. His monumental, 20-volume work – *Histoire du Consulat et de l'Empire* – appeared between 1845 and 1862. He was deeply influenced by the Napoleonic legend, yet from a political perspective he was a liberal, who served as a minister under King Louis-Philippe (1830–48) and later embraced republicanism. Thiers had a deep dislike of the English and he much admired Napoleon's stance against them. What determined the approach of many nineteenth-century writers was not so much that they were 'for or against' Napoleon but that they clearly shared a belief that he had shaped the course of history. Their writings can essentially be categorised as belonging to the 'great men' school of historical study. In essence they argued that events were shaped by the will of a single individual. More recently the tendency has been to focus on the forces and factors that caused these dramatic events.

One of the best *résumés* of the historical debate surrounding Napoleon was by the Dutch historian Pieter Geyl, whose classic *Napoleon: For and Against* was published in 1944. It was completed during the Nazi occupation of Holland while the author was under house arrest. Although Hitler is not mentioned in Geyl's book, he was clearly the inspiration for the work. To quote Geyl:

We cannot see the past in a single communicable picture, except from a point of view, which implies a choice, a personal perspective. It is impossible that two historians, especially two living in different periods should see any historical personality in the same light. The greater the political importance of an historical character, the more impossible this is.

### Developments in Napoleonic historiography

The vast addition to the literature on Napoleon could well be taken as evidence in support of this view. There remains a fascination with all aspects of the man and his life. His military achievements and campaigns in particular are an enduring source of study. According to the historian John Dunne, there have been two significant developments in Napoleonic **historiography** since 1945. These are:

- First, there has been a shift in focus away from studying Napoleon himself to examining aspects of the way he governed his various territories. Among the issues covered by this structural approach are the way élites such as the old aristocracy and the new nobility operated, the regional responses to conscription, and issues relating to law and order under the Empire. Many of these are based on carefully researched local studies.
- Second, against a backdrop of greater European integration, there has been interest in the wider continental experience under Napoleon. Historians have started to examine carefully

#### **Résumés**

Summary of the views of other writers.

#### **Historiography**

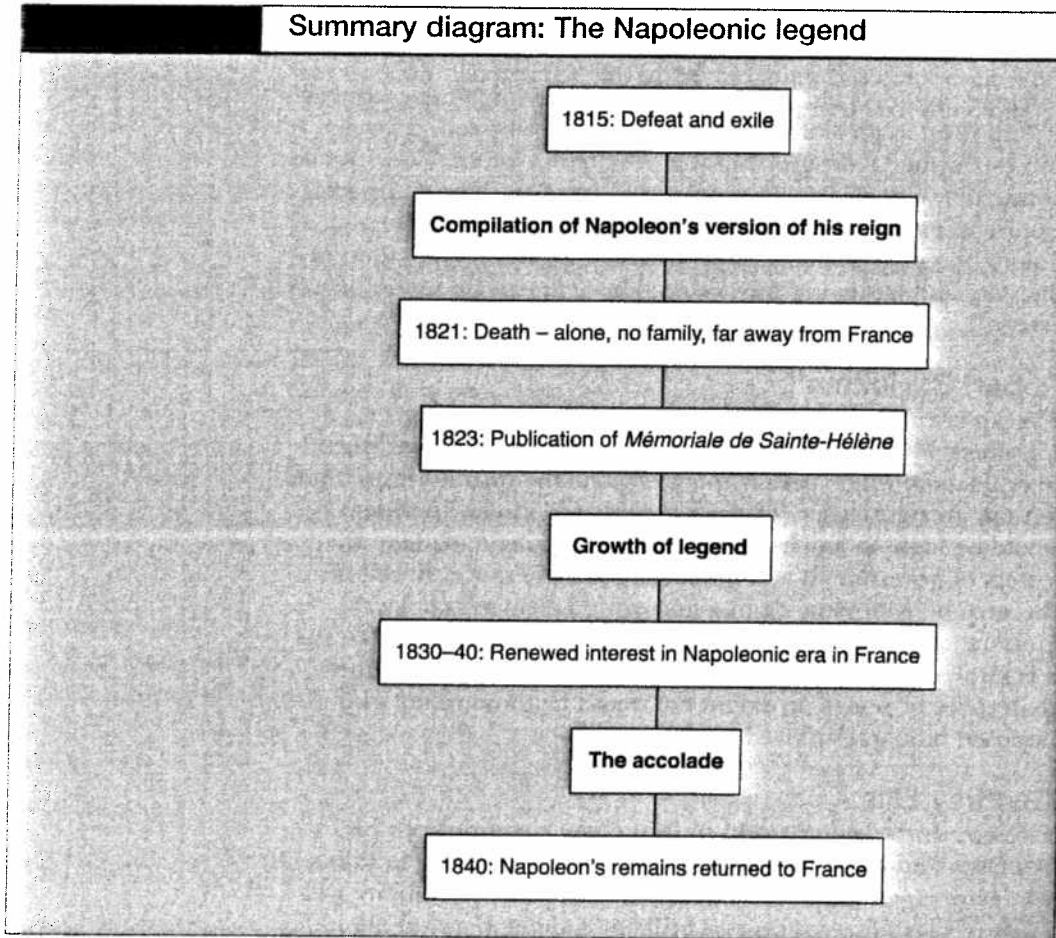
The study of the views of historians.



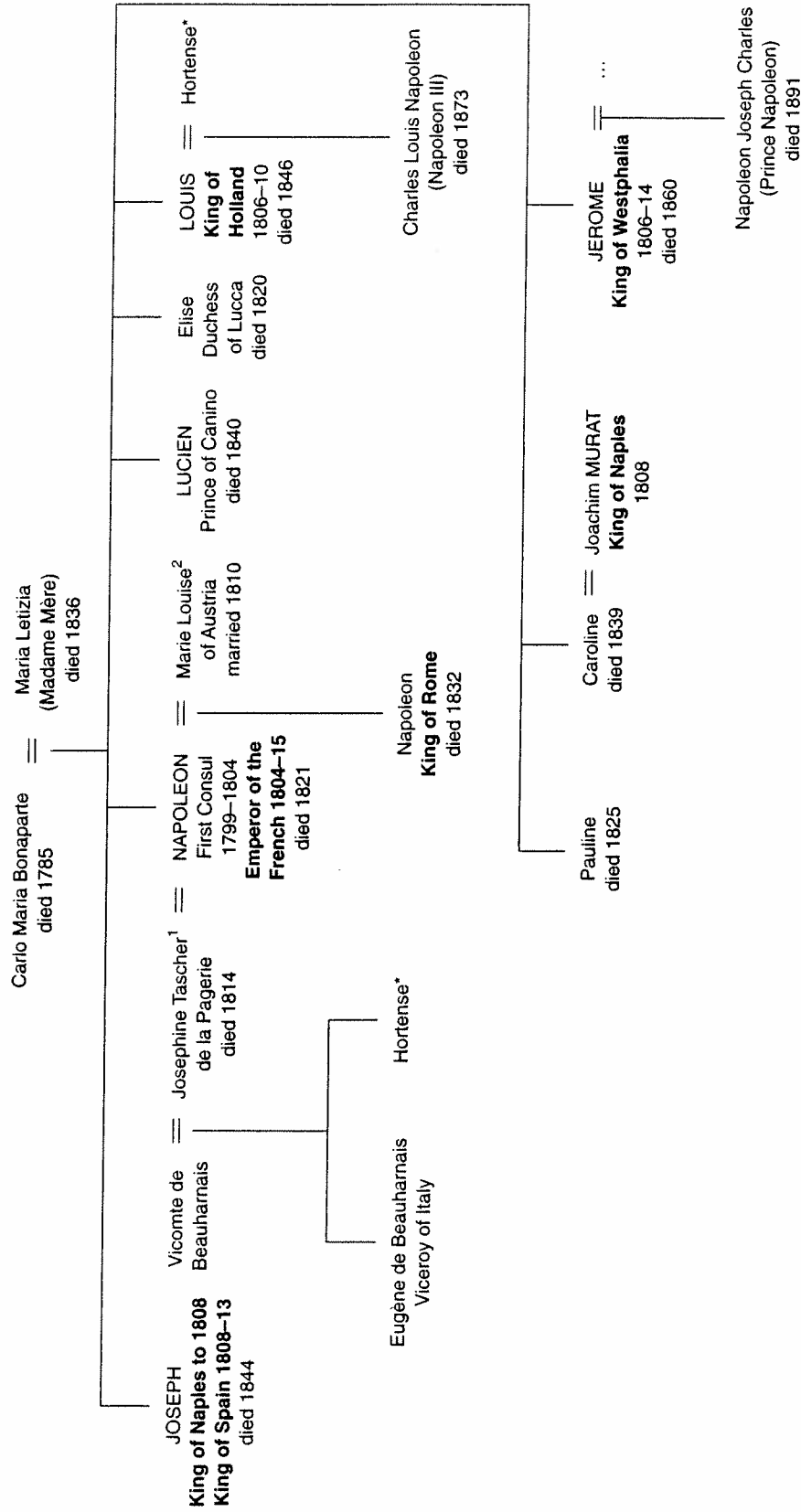
the impact of Napoleonic rule on the occupied territories making up the Empire. The focus has been on whether or not they derived any benefits from the Empire, how they fared economically, and what, if any, were the legacies of the French legal and administrative systems that were imposed upon them.

Whether we find him fascinating or repellent, it is impossible to stand aside, unaffected by Napoleon. He dominated an age and a continent, and in many ways out-lived his life. Almost two centuries after his death, the skills of legions of historians continue to be exercised in trying to unravel the life, career, impact and legacy of this extraordinary man. As Geyl observed, 'History is indeed an argument without end.'

#### Summary diagram: The Napoleonic legend



## Napoleon and his family



Napoleonic family tree. Note how Napoleon sought to place close members of his family on the thrones of countries he was seeking to control.  
<sup>1</sup> Josephine was Napoleon's first wife. <sup>2</sup> Marie Louise was Napoleon's second wife. \* Hortense was Josephine's daughter from her first marriage, and married Napoleon's brother, Louis.